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El Salvador: Rebels Target Mayors

Eight mayors and a provincial governor have been assassinated by guerrillas since the municipal elections last March. In addition, at least 85 mayors, whose lives have been threatened by leftist rebels, have resigned, leaving nearly half of El Salvador without locally elected civilian authority. The guerrilla policy of terrorizing mayors and other local officials seriously threatens government programs aimed at establishing civilian control and winning the hearts and minds of rural Salvadorans. In our view, the assassinations and threats, while significantly undermining local civilian authority, also have contributed to a weakening of popular support for the Salvadoran Marxist insurgents and their political allies.

that at least 140 mayors--101 ARENA and 39 Christian Democrats--have received either verbal or written threats.

in January that 135 of the 262 municipal mayors in El Salvador were on the verge of resigning in response to these threats, and press reports indicate that over 100 of the country's 262 municipalities no longer have resident-elected local officials. In addition to the nine who have been assassinated or have resigned, an unknown number of mayors have moved from their jurisdictions to more secure locations and another 51 posts have remained vacant since the 1988 elections. A

that ARENA, in an effort to protect its mayors, plans to set up an intelligence network.

Guerrilla Strategy

The guerrillas have announced that they regard mayors as legitimate targets because they collaborate with the government's counterinsurgency plan, help organize paramilitary groups, and administer civic action programs. We believe the primary goals of the rebels' policy are to dramatize the government's inability to maintain internal security and demonstrate the local power and authority of the insurgency.

indicates the guerrillas hope to strain relations between ARENA and the Christian Democrats during the presidential campaign. The rebels have suggested, for example, that the attacks and threats against mayors in some cases are being made by one party against the other. believe that the rebels are making most of the threats because the insurgents want to scare people into voting for the leftist Democratic Convergence. however, still suspect that some of the threats originate with the Christian Democrats.

Impact on the Government

The resignations and assassinations of so many officials have created serious problems for the day-to-day administration of the government's civic action program. The often abrupt departure of mayors and the subsequent dissolution of municipal councils have interrupted the flow of millions of dollars in economic assistance and government services. While the military can eventually assume the functions of the civil authorities in most cases, the ability of the government to deliver much-needed services, such as potable water, electric power, schools, medical facilities, and transportation has been seriously eroded in many areas.

Outlook

The assassination of the governor suggests that the rebels may be expanding their campaign, which we believe could accelerate the cycle of violence by prompting retaliatory rightwing attacks. leaders reportedly are concerned that the guerrillas may begin targeting members of the National Assembly, whom the party has been urging to campaign in their home departments. Moreover, plan to develop an armed to counter the guerrilla threat may fuel fears of renewed death squad activity. that the Anti-Communist

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Extermination Association, a rightwing vigilante group, has already announced that it would kill Guillermo Ungo, the Democratic Convergence presidential candidate and others in the leftist coalition, in retaliation for any mayors killed or forced to resign. [redacted]

The guerrillas, meanwhile, have come under increasing domestic and international criticism for their use of these and other terrorist tactics. Both the Democratic Convergence, which is officially allied with the guerrillas, and the Catholic Bishops of El Salvador have denounced the insurgents' terrorism. Leftist politicians

fear that the guerrilla actions may spawn a resurgence in rightwing violence, particularly against themselves. Although the Democratic Convergence has publicly condemned the guerrilla tactics against elected officials, [redacted] indicates that its failure to disassociate itself from the insurgency will, nonetheless, cost it votes in the 19 March presidential election.

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